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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper and guidelines is to provide a background and framework for considering the wide range of issues involved in the development and delivery of group-based parenting programs and support services. While the broad principles underpinning these guidelines apply to parent training/support groups in any setting, the focus is to highlight the issues regarding groupwork with parents of those young people who have come into contact with Youth Offending Teams. (Author)

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Groupwork with Parents of Adolescents

Parenting Education & Support Forum
In Practice Papers

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groupwork with parents of adolescents

PARENTING EDUCATION & SUPPORT FORUM

a paper to assist those working with groups of parents to consider issues they might encounter

Introduction

The aim of this paper and guidelines is to provide a background and framework for considering the wide range of issues involved in the development and delivery of group-based parenting programmes and support services. While the broad principles underpinning these guidelines apply to parent training/support groups in any setting, the focus for this document is to highlight the issues regarding groupwork with parents of teenagers and in particular parents of those young people who have come into contact with Youth Offending Teams.

Briefing notes

Background and context

Since 1997 working with parents to support the parenting role has become an integral part of many services. To their credit, the incoming government in that year recognised that what parents do and the way that they do it, has an enormous impact on public life, the culture(s) we live in, our ability to form healthy relationships, our individual well-being and the capacity to become productive members of society. This approach represented a significant perceptual shift from the previous viewpoint which saw parenting and family life as an entirely private enterprise which had no connection with public life. The reasons for this change lay partly in the recognition of research into brain development which confirmed that the first three years in a child's life are vital for laying down the foundations of healthy emotional and social as well as physical development. But it was also influenced by the growing numbers of troubled and troubling children who appeared to be the public and private manifestation of parents who no longer knew what their role was. What was going on?

The massive changes that have taken place in values, relationships between men and women and in the workplace in the past 30 years or so have left many people feeling that the world is a very different place from the one they grew up in. Finding the balance between nurturing and setting limits for behaviour can seem impossible for parents when they no longer know what is expected of them and children's demands are so powerful. One of the major casualties of the changes in roles, relationships and working practices has been a loss of confidence in the function of authority as a positive force. Exercising appropriate parental authority is often mixed up with being authoritarian by parents who through conviction or confusion attempt to have a relationship with their children which avoids exercising the benign power which is at the heart of effective parenting. This reluctance to behave authoritatively, however, leaves children uncertain of where they stand and what the limits are and parents irritated and frustrated because children are whiney and demanding and won't do as they are told.

Parental attitudes to authority are particularly tested when babies become toddlers and are driven to make sense of their world. Their strivings towards independence often start with mastery of the words, 'No' and 'Do it myself' which can come as a shock to parents who may have delighted in their pliable, sweet and co-operative baby. The parent's task at this time is to come to terms with the child's need to be under the care of an adult who is able to set limits and handle strongly expressed feelings firmly but with tolerance and flexibility. Tantruming toddlers can, in the final analysis, be picked up and removed from the scene of their distress. Not so adolescents, who in their equally passionate striving for identity and independence, display almost identical behaviours to those previously encountered in toddlerhood. Teenagers require similar qualities of response from parents in order to give them the stability they require as a backdrop to their explorations of self at this time of transition. Parents who have managed a reasonably equitable balance between nurture and boundaries up to this point may have little trouble with the extra patience and flexibility required by parents of adolescents. Those who have had difficulty with this balance, tending towards one side or the other or finding consistency difficult, may find this is the time when things feel as if they are sliding out of control.

Working with parents

Working with parents, any parents, is qualitatively different from working with other types of groups. Parenting is

very personal. It is about people's sense of identity, values, standards and life-style; partly chosen, partly the result of life circumstances and partly the result of how parents were parented themselves. Parenting is also about power, control and status. The vast majority of parents who attended the two programmes studied by Andy Gill (unpublished PhD thesis) consistently experienced and reported feelings of powerlessness, loneliness and seeing themselves as failed parents.

Parents of teenagers

The developmental stage of life that parents have reached when their children are in their teens, makes them particularly vulnerable to these feelings. Over the years parents have built up a range of intuitive and learned behaviours and beliefs which they bring to bear on their relationship with their teenager. These habits may have become firmly entrenched (much more so than in the toddler years) and are therefore likely to be more difficult to change and take a longer time.

Those contemplating working with parents of adolescents should be aware of the following issues which may affect parents ability to be able to engage with an intervention, whether in a group or as an individual:

- A sense of hopelessness about the possibility of change in themselves or their teenager. They may feel time is running out for things to improve (more hope in the toddler years).
- A loss or diminished sense of belief in their effectiveness as a parent. They may feel undermined and de-skilled.
- Resentment and/or a sense of stigma or shame about the impact of an adolescent's behaviour and its consequences, on self and other family members.
- Being 'out of sync' with other parents at this stage who may be celebrating achievement and seeing their adolescent moving towards greater independence and maturity.

For all the above reasons, and probably many more, parents of teenagers may find the requirement for change, implicit in being sent on a parenting programme (in the case of Parenting Orders) or even in one being offered, threatening to their sense of self.

The dynamics of change

The capacity of an individual to change will be affected by many factors. It will depend on their sense of security and their trust in themselves as well as others. The nature of the difficulties and the strength available to be brought to bear on problems, will also have an impact. Change is a process that requires time, patience and persistence. Parents need to be helped to anticipate that things may get worse before they get better as issues are addressed and adolescents adjust to new parental behaviour. Programmes advocating new ways of relating or communicating may be experienced as an attack on existing skills/habits/ methods, which in turn will be resisted.

There are many stakeholders in the wish for change in the context of running parenting programmes in the Youth Justice system. Everyone involved in a parenting group, from funders to participants has an interest in it. The Government wants parents to change the way they bring up their children, so that they can participate fully in school and economic life and not cause trouble to others; agencies have an investment in change, partly for altruistic reasons and partly for their own auditing purposes; group facilitators are interested in helping parents find appropriate ways to change their behaviour, but also need to adhere to the aims and expectations of the agency; some parents will recognise that they need to make changes, but don't know how to go about this; other parents will be convinced that it is their teenager who needs to change, not them.

Each of the above will have their own agenda and their own illusions about the possibilities and potential for change. Programmes may serve to change parents' image of themselves and relationships with children, providing an illusion that things are or can be different, but without sufficient time being allowed to produce actual change in the way a parent operates internally. The risk may be that this 'illusion' satisfies the wish of both the provider and the parent that change has taken place, thereby creating expectations in all concerned that no further effort or support is necessary.

Most people find change difficult and as we have seen above, parents of teenagers, particularly when their offspring are getting into trouble with the law, are very vulnerable. Times of crisis or transition, however, are often valuable opportunities for introducing new ideas as parents struggle to deal with situations and behaviours they have not faced before. Change, however, means lowering defences so that shifts in attitude and behaviour can occur. It follows from this that adequate support during this time of vulnerability needs to be available, together with follow-up to help parents withstand on-going stresses. If these supports are not in place, then parents may be left with their vulnerabilities exposed, struggling to manage changes that have not yet been incorporated into their normal way of functioning. They will effectively have been set up to fail. There is no such thing as a quick fix in this work.

Research has consistently shown that bringing together a group of people (usually more than three and less than twelve) with a particular focus, aim or purpose can be more effective in achieving agreed goals than by working with each member as an individual. Implicit in this is that there is something about what happens when a group comes together, that cannot occur when fewer than three people are present.

Working with parents in groups: *what works and why*

When is a group a group?
First there is an individual.
Then there is a group of individuals.
Then there is a group.

Group process, or what happens in a group between participants and the facilitator in each session and over time, is not magic but it is powerful. Making a group feel safe enough for participants to engage in, to move from being a group of individuals to 'a group', is one of the most important skills of group facilitation as part of a helping process.

Helping parents to be more effective in what they do is not, as Hilton Davis says, just about knowing the skills of parenting and imparting this to parents; it includes a much more complex process of communication. Since few helpers (whatever their qualifications) have covered in depth the theory and skills involved in these communication processes, or the theory and skills of groupwork with parents, in their basic or even advanced training, the following serves as an *introduction* to what is involved in group-based parenting interventions. It should not, however, be used as a substitute for high-quality initial training and on-going professional development.

When thinking about groupwork in the context of running parenting programmes, it is useful to retain a distinction between the process that occurs as a result of a group of people coming together and the content of any programme that is used. It is the facilitation of the former process that is the main focus of these guidelines.

There is no published research specifically on the groupwork aspect of parenting programmes, but the following are common threads which have emerged from research into the efficacy of group-based parenting programmes for children between three and ten years.

Parents reported that they:

- felt less alone with their problems
- felt valued and respected in their role as parents, which in turn changed the way they felt about themselves as parents and increased self-confidence
- felt they had improved communication skills within the family and generally
- had changed the way they perceived their children; their enjoyment was increased
- had increased the range of strategies they would use for managing children's behaviour.

Feedback from parents taking part in programmes currently being evaluated by the Policy Research Bureau on behalf of the Youth Justice Board are typified by the following comment from one evaluator:

> ***'Positive feedback has been received. Many parents continue to experience difficulties with their children but are saying that they benefited from attendance in various ways, including learning new skills, feeling better able to cope with difficult behaviour and feeling better supported by other people experiencing similar problems.'***

But groups are not appropriate for everyone. Webster-Stratton and Herbert and many others have long recognised that groups are not always a suitable forum for helping people to learn and change. Individual work may meet their needs better or be necessary before a parent is ready to gain from a group experience. Preliminary evidence from the National Evaluation of the Youth Justice Board's Parenting Programme supports this and suggests that Youth Justice parenting projects need to be flexible in the range of support they have on offer.

These are some of the advantages and disadvantages of groupwork.

Advantages of group work

- Potential to offer and receive support from other group members.
- Chance to learn through interaction with group.
- Opportunity to try out new skills and behaviour.
- Opportunity to challenge and confront negative behaviour in a positive way.
- Chance to learn negotiating and decision-making skills.
- Opportunity to learn how to obtain attention legitimately.

Disadvantages of group work

- Too little attention to individual members who may be in great need.
- Too little time to spend developing a trusting relationship with the worker.
- Inhibited members may not feel able to participate fully.

The following are some of the reasons for choosing individual over groupwork and some of the disadvantages.

Advantages of individual work

- Individual attention for those who receive very little.
- Time and space to develop a trusting relationship with a worker.
- Opportunity to increase feelings of self-worth before joining a group.
- Time to check out some concerns that may be private or embarrassing.

Disadvantages of individual work

- Interaction with peers prevented.
- No opportunity to monitor relationships in a group.
- No development of peer group support.
- No arena for testing out appropriate behaviour with peers.

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Components of effective group-based parenting programmes

An effective group is made up of many components. The thought and planning that takes place before, during and after the sessions, the human qualities and skills of the facilitator(s), the environment in which the group takes place, the appropriateness and quality of the content of any programme used, the pace at which a programme is run and not least, the engagement, commitment and contributions of the participants. Bringing together all these elements takes time. An effective group begins by being a well thought-through group.

Thinking and planning

Offering a programme to parents conveys a message about how they are viewed by the service. It is important to consider how this message will come across to the parents who are being targeted. On the whole, parents are not accustomed to being considered as 'respected clients' or 'valued customers' as the so-called partnership culture would have us believe. Nor is it often that the professionals with whom they have contact (social workers, teachers, GPs, police) consider their needs as parents separately from those of their children. So a recommended model of working would attempt to address this incongruence of rhetoric and actions in order that parents attending a programme feel respected and valued. This message should permeate planning, publicity, delivery and follow-up of any programme being run. The following are all part of this process:

- **Issues of time** Allocate sufficient time to enable all staff to become involved in thinking about the issues and planning the details of the programme. This will both create a team approach which acknowledges the contribution of all, and reduce the number of problems that inevitably occur.
- **Clarity about the aims of the programme** It is important from the outset that it is clear what the programme is aiming to achieve. Is it to help parents better understand adolescent development and behaviour? Change parents' attitudes and expectations? Change the way they relate and communicate with their teenagers? Develop more effective behaviour and discipline skills? Reduce offending behaviour in their offspring? All of these? Others?

  Identifying the aims and range of themes to be covered will partly determine how many sessions the programme needs to contain.
- **Clarity about the target population** It is always important to identify the likely or targeted membership of any programme that is being offered. This will enable a more realistic assessment of the following:
  - What the content of a programme needs to be, e.g. the themes to be covered, the structure of each session and the learning/teaching methods to be employed.
  - The starting point parents are likely to be at, e.g. do they first need to feel safe, tell their story and let off steam or are they ready to begin learning skills from the outset;
  - The appropriate combination of participants, e.g. is this group only for parents on Orders or will it include voluntary participants from the Youth Justice system and/or parents of teenagers from the general population? The implications for running groups mixed in this way are:

    Attracting voluntary participants Excellent referral networks, creative ideas and lateral thinking are all important as general advertising has been shown to be largely ineffective in recruiting parents of teenagers to groups. Involving fathers requires particular consideration.

    Addressing difference between voluntary and non-voluntary status Consider how this will be handled within the group. Research has shown that skilled facilitation is the factor which makes most difference in the successful running of mixed groups.
- **The number of sessions the programme will need to run for** This will be determined by the starting point of the parents (see above), the aim(s) of the programme and the time estimated to be required in order to meet the needs of the parents attending and cover the material adequately. The number of sessions should not be determined by a pre-written programme or, ideally, by finance. Arrangements for following up participants after the programme has ended will also need to be considered.
- **Issues of gender, ethnicity and other difference** Consider the implications for the group dynamic and individuals involved of there being only one man (or woman), black person, person with a serious disability attending a group. Consider holding separate groups for mothers and fathers, particularly in areas where traditional male attitudes and/or domestic violence are pervasive.
- **Issues of place and time** Consider whether the venue is likely to affect parents' willingness to attend, i.e. has negative associations? Is it easily reached by public transport? Does timing mean that parents are able to attend if they are working? Will a creche/child-care be provided?
- **Issues to do with literacy** Research done by the Trust for the Study of Adolescence has shown

that many parents attending groups set up by YOT teams have low levels of literacy. Consider the implications of this when choosing a programme and methods of delivery.

- **Pre-group visits** Home visits can provide an opportunity to begin building relationships of trust and can also be used for assessment of suitability for group membership. The following points, developed by a parenting group co-ordinator in the Youth Justice field, may be useful:
  - ***Timing*** Arrange a visit shortly before the group is planned to start. This is very important to maintain the client's interest and to begin to develop a rapport. If the visit is too far in advance you will need to return before the group starts.
  - ***Emotional checkout*** Enquire how the client is feeling generally as well as about attending the programme. Normalise their anxiety by explaining that it is very common for people to feel uncertain about what might be in store. Acknowledge that they may have many other worries that might make it difficult to attend the sessions, but others have found that the time and effort invested has been worthwhile.
  - ***Clarifying*** Be clear about whether they are on a Parenting Order or coming voluntarily and discuss if or how this might be made known in the group. Give some feedback from past members.
  - ***Identify literacy level*** Check out sensitively whether they can read or write so you can plan the sessions accordingly.
  - ***Practical issues*** Discuss practicalities such as whether they need a creche place (if you are able to offer one), refreshment preferences or dietary restrictions, bus fares, a map or directions.
  - ***Connection*** Give a telephone number and name of a person to ask for and explain that they can call prior to the start of the group should they think of anything they want to know.
  - ***Information*** Explain some of the themes the programme will cover, the number of people expected to attend and the potential group make-up, i.e. men, women, etc.
  - ***Relationship assessment*** Couples (if both parents are attending) need to consider how they will deal with different opinions in a group setting and generally how they handle conflict. Part of the assessment should take into account relationship issues, i.e. history of domestic violence. Some couples may need to be placed in separate groups.
- **Creating the environment** Attention to detail is one of the ways in which a safe place is created for parents to be able to trust that they will be listened to. Use the following list and add your own ideas:
  - ***Atmosphere*** Choose or adapt a room so that it reflects the atmosphere you wish to create. Effort taken, like fresh flowers (even in a jam-jar), will be noticed by participants.
  - ***Chairs*** Use comfortable, adult-sized chairs which are as similar in height and type as possible. Arrange them in a way that allows people to see each other and interact.
  - ***Making people welcome*** Think through welcoming arrangements that will help put people at their ease. Direction signs, someone available to greet people, an organised room and somewhere to hang coats will all convey a message that participants are respected. Name badges, at least for initial sessions, can help break the ice.
  - ***Quiet and privacy*** Try to make sure that you will not be interrupted by external noise or people coming in, for the duration of the group.
  - ***Food and drink*** Have available good quality refreshments that are culturally appropriate to the people you anticipate attending.
- **Evaluation** Evaluation criteria may be laid down by an agency, funders or the government. This is likely to consist mainly of statistical data. It is important also that participants and facilitators have a way of capturing, session by session, how things are going. For the parents this could be how the content of the programme is affecting their feelings about themselves and their children, their continued commitment to attend the programme, their ability to apply the skills they are learning etc. For the facilitators this will mean monitoring points such as their group leadership skills, how appropriate the themes and activities are for the group membership, whether all of the session content was covered, any changes that need to be made etc.

  We also strongly recommend that you have an evaluation methodology in place from the outset to ensure that you have met your aims and objectives. The Parenting Education & Support Forum has developed an Evaluation Toolkit which can help.

Choosing a facilitator

Two of the most experienced practitioners in the field of interventions with parents and children, Gerald Patterson of the Oregon Social Learning Centre and Carolyn Webster Stratton from the University of Washington in Seattle, have come separately over the years to a similar conclusion about what

they consider to be one of the most significant components of a programme. The key factor, they agree, is the quality of relationships parents develop with the facilitators of the programme. It is this, rather than the content of the course, which allows a parent to realise that they have the power to make changes in the way they respond to their children, sustain these changes over time and carry them into other parts of their lives.

As a result of this realisation both Patterson and Webster Stratton place considerable emphasis on the selection and training of people with appropriate skills and personal qualities.

An effective facilitator is likely to:

- hold beliefs and attitudes that contribute to building authentic partnerships with parents
- understand the processes involved in a helping relationship and how to apply the appropriate skills in practice
- be able to use an appropriate range of counselling and communication skills
- be self-aware and able to manage feelings and experiences triggered by discussing sensitive issues
- understand the key role that relationships have in fostering the capacity to learn
- understand how the range of experiences and feelings which parents may bring can affect, positively and/or negatively, their capacity to learn, grow and change
- be able to understand his/her own biases
- understand the importance of being open to learning about the biases of others.

In his PhD thesis, Andy Gill identifies the main ingredients contained within parenting training that are important in enabling group process and change to take place. He compared two programmes for parents of teenagers: the Fun and Families, Leicester programme and the WINNING programme (Dangel and Polster, 1988) and found that 'in relation to group process and effectiveness there has been significant evidence to suggest that mutual support, problem solving and sharing are vital ingredients, and the methods which enable such a process have been identified'. These are as shown in the table below.

The skills in the table can be acquired through professional training and experience, but the capacity to apply them in ways which engender trust and promote learning is contained in the following core personal attributes and values.

A parent group facilitator needs to be:

- anti-discriminatory (including anti-sectarian)
- creative
- empathetic
- enthusiastic
- humble
- non-judgemental
- reflective
- respectful and value others
- self-aware and self-confident
- supportive.

Groupwork and a skilled group facilitator have been identified as important resources in the complex process of helping people learn and change. An appropriate programme for the intended group of parents completes the picture.

Choosing a programme

The choice of a parenting programme will vary according to the remit of an agency and the needs of parents in different communities. In the document *Parenting in a Youth Justice Context* the authors Coleman, Henricson and Roker (1999) identify a number of criteria against which programmes for parents of young offenders should be measured for successful outcomes:

Effective group leader skills across both programmes

Role	Definition/skill
Building a supportive relationship	Self-disclosure; use of humour and being optimistic about change (believe in and sell the potential effectiveness of the programme).
Collectivising	Collectivise parental experiences and strengths. Encourage mutual support to enable problem-solving and change.
Empowering parents	Reinforce parental insights, challenge powerless thoughts and promote support systems. To build momentum ('rollercoaster effect') focus on positive parental and child behaviour improvement.
Teaching	Teach and practise skills through experiential exercises to help make connections (incremental step-by-step approach).
Interpreting	Use analogies to explain theoretical concepts and reframe parental explanations to reshape beliefs about the nature of child behaviour problems. Link theory to individual examples and experiences.
Leading and challenging	Provide structural frameworks for problem-solving; pace group so individual needs are met; work collaboratively with parents to understand resistance. Balance the needs of the individual within the group.
Prophesising	Predict and acknowledge problems and setbacks; emphasise the effectiveness of the programme to deal with such difficulties.

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- changes in behaviour of young people
- changes in the attitudes and behaviour of parents
- changes in the behaviour of other family members
- parental satisfaction.

In order for these outcomes to be achieved, it was suggested in the same document that the focus of programmes should be on the risk factors for criminal behaviour which have been identified as being most malleable, i.e. parental neglect and lack of supervision and ineffective, harsh and erratic discipline. Put in a more positive way, this involves the promotion of authoritative parenting which entails a combination of warmth and demandingness on the part of the parent, coupled with respect for the young person's psychological autonomy.

The programme content of such a parenting course is likely to include:

- understanding adolescent development
- the parents' role in adolescence
- active listening, communication and negotiation skills
- setting limits
- managing challenging behaviour
- looking after yourself as a parent.

Whatever the content, however, the factor that is likely to make the programme most effective is the skill of the facilitator in understanding group needs and process and being able to use groupwork skills to provide an optimum environment for learning and change to take place.

Groupwork skills

The skills used when leading a group and facilitating learning are gleaned from a variety of contexts and settings ranging from personal experience to specialist training. The following is a summary of those considered particularly relevant for the work involved in running groups for parents:

- **Creating a framework/setting boundaries** A secure, positive and caring atmosphere will develop if the leader owns his/her authority within the group by taking charge and showing (modelling) warmth and respect for each member. Because each parent will bring their own code of behaviour and way of relating which will affect the group dynamic, it is important from the outset to create a group code, often referred to as 'ground rules' or guidelines. These rules encourage the group to function in a respectful and empathic way, enabling every member to contribute and be heard, as well as providing a reference point should difficulties arise.
- **Tone setting** This is a crucial dimension of managing group effectiveness which will affect the atmosphere and attitudes which make up the mood of the group. The physical aspects of tone setting are covered in the section on Creating the Environment. Tone is also set by actions, words and what the facilitator allows to happen.
- **Active listening** This essential tool for group functioning involves tuning in to tone of voice and choice of words, body language, individual feelings and needs and interaction between participants. Active listening provides the clues to group process – what is happening in the 'here and now' in a group.
- **Reflection** In order to clarify or check out a correct understanding of what a speaker is expressing the facilitator can reflect back what s/he has heard, e.g. You seem to be saying ... or My understanding of the point you are making is ... This can be used for both content and feelings, to point out differences and make connections, e.g. I get the feeling that everyone is ...
- **Clarification and questioning** Asking for clarification can help members who are confused, speak in vague terms or incomplete thoughts, become understood by others. This can be specific but is often most useful when put as open-ended question ... Can you tell us a bit more about that?
- **Summarising** It is important to use any opportunity to summarise what has been covered and collect together the various contributions people have made. This bringing together of disparate points or details can help individuals to feel heard, differences to be acknowledged, connections to be made and enables the group to validate what has been learned or achieved before moving on to another theme or the end of a session.
- **Teaching** Presenting ideas or theories in a more formal way is sometimes appropriate and will fit more easily with some parents' learning style. It will particularly appeal to those who are more comfortable with information than experiential learning, or need to know why a strategy is effective or the theory behind behaviour management skills before being willing to put them into practice. Whenever including a more didactic approach it is important to keep in mind the following:
  - make it interesting and energising
  - make it relevant
  - consider cultural and gender differences
  - keep it brief: 5-8 minutes
  - be sure information is current, correct and objective.
- **Encouraging and supporting** At the beginning of a programme or session it is helpful for the facilitator to acknowledge that many people may feel uncomfortable in groups to start with, but that this is likely to subside as people get to know each other. Support and encouragement will continue to be important throughout the life of the group when difficult issues or themes are

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unfamiliar and seem challenging.

- **Modelling and self-disclosure** As the subject matter is parenting, the facilitator will inevitably be experienced, probably unconsciously, as an authority figure i.e. a parent. This is not because he or she sets themself up as an expert but because of the nature of group dynamics. Understanding this and working with it in a constructive way will not create dependency, but rather give an experience of positive parenting, which can be very helpful. Self-disclosure can be helpful if used appropriately to show that everyone has had a share of difficult experiences and that these can be spoken about without losing face.
- **Use of eyes** As powerful a tool as speech in communicating and receiving information from members, eyes can be used in four ways:
  - observation, to scan for non-verbal cues
  - to get members to look at other members when talking
  - to draw out members
  - to cut off members.
- **Use of voice** The leader's voice can be used to influence the tone, atmosphere, pace and content of the group, i.e.
  - a strong, stern voice may intimidate and inhibit sharing
  - a non-assertive/tentative voice may cause lack of respect or undermine the confidence in the leader
  - a warm, encouraging voice may help anxious or withdrawn members
  - a quiet, calm voice can be soothing when strong emotions are being expressed, or to encourage reflection and sensitivity.
- **Multicultural understanding** Awareness of multicultural issues

parents attending a programme is essential for effective group leadership. Each member's culture will also affect their way of participating in the group. The leader's modeling of how differences can be accommodated and common denominators identified will support the development of a tolerant and respectful group culture.

Co-facilitation

Although it is possible for a skilled facilitator to run an effective group single-handed, co-working is often preferred, particularly for groups where there is a perceived high level of need. The following is an overview of the advantages and disadvantages of working in this way.

Co-leading a group is an option that is often chosen for the wrong reasons, e.g. the group is seen as 'difficult' in some way; for support and protection because neither facilitator is experienced or because two people (perhaps from different agencies) have been instructed to co-operate in this way. Co-leading is a skill in itself, requiring substantial prior negotiation, attention to each other during the session and systematic review between sessions and afterwards. When done well it is of benefit to members as well as leaders. Choosing to co-lead is also a matter of temperament and willingness to trust others as partners. Enforced, or done badly, it can do more harm than good.

Advantages of co-leading

- Sharing of leadership tasks, e.g. one observing or keeping a record while the other leads; one offering emotional support while the other focuses on the task; taking turns to lead.
- The quality of planning review and feedback for each leader can be greatly improved by co-leading.

when done jointly.

- It protects the course if one of the leaders feels de-skilled, distracted, unwell or out of their depth; it allows continuity even if one leader is absent.
- Members have two leaders to show interest in them or concern about them; two distinct personalities that they can relate to, or test themselves against, or identify with. When they differ in race, sex, class, age or some other relevant factor, this may permit members to work on any prejudices they may have about one of the pair being able to deal with the topic or lead the group for them.
- Members can see two adults working collaboratively with mutual respect, despite their differences.

Disadvantages of co-leading

- Competition, stress and tension between two leaders can be distracting and unhelpful for all concerned. The co-leaders must negotiate their goals and roles very carefully in advance to avoid or minimise this.
- Differences in assumptions, orientation, style and pace need ironing out so they don't affect the running of the session.
- Course members may make one out to be the baddie and the other the goodie (even among adults!) in difficult times. The co-leading relationship has to be strong enough to address this.

Handling difficult moments in groups

Group workers, however experienced, are from time to time likely to encounter situations where they feel unsettled or lost for words. This may be due to the behaviour of a group member, the mood of the whole group, a challenge or question that touches a nerve or de-skills, or the

leader's pre-occupation with concerns from outside of the group. In other words, difficulties can arise from problems within the group or from within the facilitator(s). Both situations are, however, normal and probably inevitable, given the fallibility of all human beings and no facilitator should ever feel inadequate just because difficult issues arise. The good-enough facilitator is able to convey authority without knowing all the answers and be 'in charge' whilst continuing to share power with group members. Being able to acknowledge that you don't have the answer, need to take a break to think about how to proceed or to allow recovery time following a highly charged emotional outburst, is a valuable opportunity to model the key qualities of authoritative parenting.

But of course every facilitator will have their worst fears and fantasies about what might happen that would cause them to feel powerless. It is through training and experience that these fears can be allayed. Over time a repertoire of skills will be built up that will at least minimise both the frequency and scale of problems, and confidence in one's capacity to handle any difficult moments will develop.

There are many tried and tested strategies for dealing with difficult behaviour in groups but the facilitator's best friend is preparation, anticipation and ground rules (or group guidelines) which have been worked out and agreed by all members.

Some level of anxiety is normal when taking part in anything new. For parents coming to a group about something as intimate as the way they parent their children, a high level of anxiety is almost inevitable. Feelings of uncertainty about what to expect or how to behave in an unfamiliar setting are more likely to trigger extreme or disruptive behaviour. Anticipating these feelings, a group leader can take a number of steps to help members feel more comfortable. For example:

- Visit potential members at home prior to the group starting so a relationship with one person has been established.
- Create a welcoming environment with someone available to put people at ease as they arrive.
- Plan an activity to break the ice and help people relax or have a laugh.
- Begin the actual session by explaining that people have many reasons for attending (even if they have been Ordered to do so) e.g. to learn new strategies, meet other parents, understand children's behaviour etc.
- Talk about what happens in groups and how different sorts of participation are all acceptable, e.g. listening quietly but speaking little, participating actively, etc.
- Explain how Ground Rules or Guidelines help a group to function.

In addition it can be helpful to let members know that there may be times during the course of the group when they will feel odd, uncomfortable or even de-skilled for a while. This is because trying out changes in behaviour can feel quite de-stabilising – new approaches don't feel natural at first. Members are likely to feel self-conscious and clumsy when trying out new ideas or strategies and of course they may not always work straight away. These are some of the difficult feelings members may go through during the course of the programme:

- expectations that they will learn magic solutions
- disappointment that there are no quick or easy answers
- confused, even angry, when long-held views are challenged
- frustrated with different views
- impatient with people who are pre-occupied with their own concerns
- envious of others who seem to have things easier.

It can help members to feel 'normal' by mentioning that they might experience some of the above feelings. Also that as human beings we may not be able to behave in as mature a way as we wish when experiencing difficult feelings. This is why it is important to be understanding of each other.

On the positive side, it is important to emphasise that experience has shown that as confidence grows, parents have a real sense of achievement and excitement about their new skills and improved relationships with their children.

More about ground rules or guidelines

Everyone in the group will want to get their differing needs met. One of the ways to ensure this is to spend time at the beginning working out together what sort of rules might help everyone to be heard and get what they want from attending the programme. The list might include the following:

- the boundaries of confidentiality
- listening respectfully to each other – no interrupting
- one person to speak at a time
- owning feelings and opinions by starting sentences with 'I'
- commenting on what is said and not the person saying it
- respect for different points of view
- expressing all feelings is acceptable (some actions may not be)
- regular attendance and punctuality as part of respect for others
- responsibility for what it is comfortable to share (no expectations that it is necessary to reveal all)
- creation of an agreed signal (like holding up a wrist with a watch on it) to be used by any member if they feel like someone is taking up too much time.

Others can be added to suit particular circumstances.

These rules or guidelines can then be re-stated or raised as a way of responding to particular behaviours and reinforcing the agreed values and aims of the group.

Useful phrases to use when reminding members of ground rules are:

- 'We need to remember what we've agreed about ...'
- 'I want to stop you now because we've lost track of ... ground rule about language, letting one person speak at a time, etc.'
- 'This is clearly a very important issue for you but we need to move on now – we could continue this discussion during the break, after the session ...'

Session recording

Active listening is the channel for understanding group process during sessions. De-briefing with a co-leader, recording and regular supervision are the ways of comprehending what is happening in a group over a period of time. A simple session record sheet can help facilitate this learning. Details to be recorded might include:

- date of session
- where in sequence (e.g. third of 10)
- plan for the session
- who was present
- who was absent
- seating plan (useful for thinking about alliances, etc.)
- what happened that was relevant to the theme of the session
- what happened in relation to the exercises
- comments on individuals
- comments on leadership/co-leadership
- summary (link what happened to what was planned and identify next steps, concerns, what to look out for next time).

Supervision/consultation

Supervision is a term taken from counselling and psychotherapy. It describes the process of talking through with a suitably qualified and experienced person, the experience of running a particular group (or individual intervention). Supervision, or consultation as it is sometimes called, may work best when it is with someone from outside of the management hierarchy. This could be someone from an allied but separate agency, and takes place away from the work setting so genuine independent thinking can take place. This allows the facilitator to develop a secure and trusting relationship with the supervisor and use the time to reflect on difficult feelings, to think about issues from an objective perspective, without anxiety regarding how s/he might be perceived as a colleague or member of staff. A contract with the supervisor needs to be made at the outset which will define what is appropriate to bring to the sessions, how frequently meetings will take place and the boundaries of confidentiality. Supervision is an invaluable learning opportunity, about oneself and the work under discussion, as well as being an essential part of professional development for all parent support workers. The main facets are:

- **Self-reflection** How the leadership role, group dynamics and session themes affect the facilitator.
- **Process** How members are developing with the programme over time, both as individuals and as a group
- **Content of sessions** What themes were covered and how the planned content fitted into the time-scale of the group; the flow of discussion and success of activities and exercises; issues arising and where to go next.
- **Frequency** Initially supervision should take place following each group session. As the group progresses and the facilitator becomes more experienced, then sessions may be wider apart. Supervision may take place individually, with a co-leader or in a small group of group leaders.

These briefing notes and guidelines have set in a contemporary context work with parents, and parents of teenagers in particular, and outlined the complex and multi-faceted nature of groupwork with parents. This is an area which is only now beginning to be researched. We urge you to incorporate into your work findings which indicate good practice as they emerge and to seek high quality training, regular supervision and professional development opportunities. Parents deserve no less!

Elizabeth Howell and Olivia Montuschi with contributions from
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